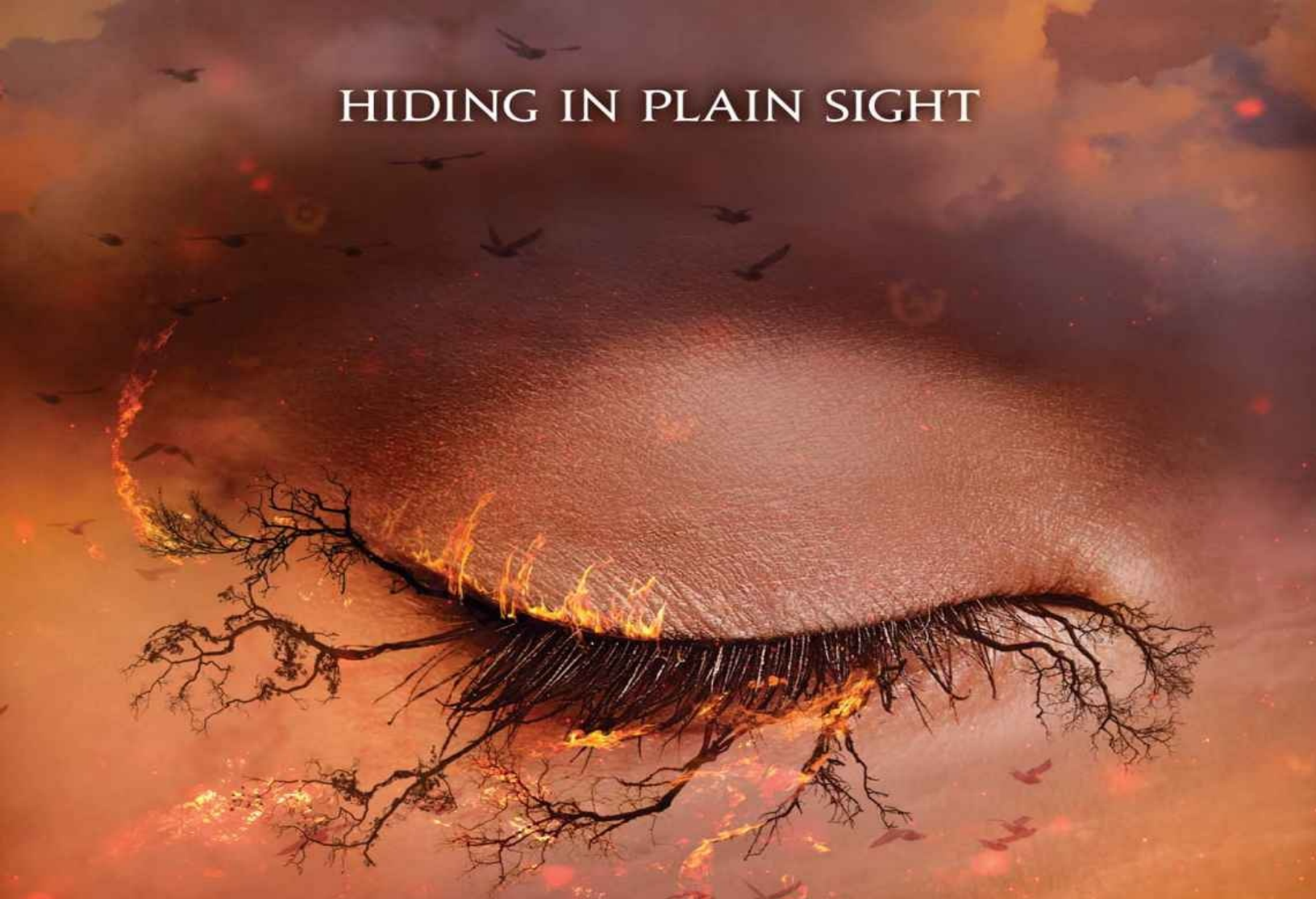
HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT



SHADOW ME

A SHATTER ME NOVELLA

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE SHATTER ME SERIES

SHADOW ME

TAHEREH MAFI

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One

I’m already awake when my alarm goes off, but I haven’t opened my eyes yet. I’m too tired. My muscles are tight, still painfully sore from an intense training session two days ago, and my body feels heavy. Dead.

My brain hurts.

The alarm is shrill and persistent. I ignore it. I stretch out the muscles in my neck and groan, quietly. The clock won’t stop screeching. Someone pounds, hard, against the wall near my head, and I hear Adam’s muffled voice shouting at me to shut off the alarm.

“Every morning,” he shouts. “You do this every morning. I swear to God, Kenji, one of these days I’m going to come in there and destroy that thing.”

“All right,” I mumble, mostly to myself. “All right. Calm down.”

“*Turn it off*.”

I take a deep, ragged breath. Slap blindly at the clock until it stops blaring. We finally got our own rooms on base, but I still can’t seem to find peace. Or privacy. These walls are paper thin, and Adam hasn’t changed a bit. Still moody. No sense of humor. Generally irritated. Sometimes I can’t remember why we’re friends.

With some effort, I drag myself up, into a sitting position. I rub at my eyes, making a mental list of all the things I have to do today, and then, in a sudden, horrible rush—

I remember what happened yesterday.

Jesus.

So much drama in one day I can hardly keep it all straight.

Apparently Juliette has a long-lost sister. Apparently Warner tortured Juliette’s sister. Warner and Juliette broke up. Juliette ran off screaming. Warner had a panic attack. Warner’s ex-girlfriend showed up. His ex-girlfriend *slapped* him. Juliette got drunk. No, wait—J got drunk *and* she shaved her head. And then I saw Juliette in her underwear—an image I’m still trying to erase from my mind—and then, as if all that wasn’t enough to deal with, after dinner last night,

I did something very, very stupid.

I drop my head in my hands and hate myself, remembering. A fresh wave of embarrassment hits me, hard, and I take another deep breath. Force myself to look up. To clear my thoughts.

Not everything is horrible.

I have my own room now—a small room—but my own room with a window and a view of industrial AC units. I have a desk. A bed. A basic closet. I still have to share a bathroom with some of the other guys, but I can't complain. A private room is a luxury I haven't had in a while. It's nice to have space at the end of the night to be alone with my thoughts. Somewhere to hang the happy face I force myself to wear even when I'm having a shitty day.

I'm grateful.

I'm exhausted, overworked, and stressed out, but I'm grateful.

I force myself to say it, out loud. *I'm grateful.* I take a few moments to feel it. Recognize it. I force myself to smile, to unclench the tightness in my face that would otherwise default too easily to anger. I whisper a quick thank-you to the unknown, to the air, to the lonely ghosts eavesdropping on my private conversations with no one. I have a roof over my head and clothes on my back and food waiting for me every morning. I have friends. A makeshift family. I'm lonely but I'm not alone. My body works, my brain works, I'm alive. It's a good life. I have to make a conscious effort to remember that. To choose to be happy every day. If I didn't, I think my own pain would've killed me a long time ago.

I'm grateful.

Someone knocks at my door—two sharp raps—and I jump to my feet, startled. The knock is unusually formal; most of us don't even bother with the courtesy.

I yank on a pair of sweatpants and, tentatively, open the door.

Warner.

My eyes widen as I look him up and down. I don't think he's ever shown up at my door before, and I can't decide what's weirder: the fact that he's here or the fact that he looks so normal. Well, normal for Warner. He looks exactly like he always does. Shiny. Polished. Eerily calm and pulled together for someone whose girlfriend dumped him the day before. You'd never know he was the same dude who, in the aftermath, I found lying on the floor having a panic attack.

"Uh, hey." I clear the sleep from my throat. "What's going on?"

"Did you just wake up?" he says, looking at me like I'm an insect.

"It's six in the morning. Everyone in this wing wakes up at six in the morning. You don't have to look so disappointed."

Warner peers past me, into my room, and for a moment, says nothing. Then,

quietly: “Kishimoto, if I considered other people’s mediocre standards a sufficient metric by which to measure my own accomplishments, I’d never have amounted to anything.” He looks up, meets my eyes. “You should demand more of yourself. You’re entirely capable.”

“Are you—?” I blink, stunned. “I’m sorry, was that your idea of a compliment?”

He stares at me, his face impassive. “Get dressed.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You taking me out to breakfast?”

“We have three more unexpected guests. They just arrived.”

“*Oh*.” I take an unconscious step back. “Oh shit.”

“Yes.”

“More kids of the supreme commanders?”

Warner nods.

“Are they dangerous?” I ask.

Warner almost smiles, but he looks unhappy. “Would they be here if they weren’t?”

“Right.” I sigh. “Good point.”

“Meet me downstairs in five minutes, and I’ll fill you in.”

“Five minutes?” My eyes widen. “Uh-uh, no way. I need to take a shower. I haven’t even eaten breakfast—”

“If you’d been up at three, you would’ve had time for all that and more.”

“Three in the morning?” I gape at him. “Are you out of your mind?”

And when he says, without a hint of irony—

“No more than usual”

—it’s crystal clear to me that this dude is not okay.

I sigh, hard, and turn away, hating myself for always noticing this kind of thing, and hating myself even more for my constant need to follow up. I can’t help it. Castle said it to me once when I was a kid: he told me I was unusually compassionate. I never thought about it like that—with words, with an explanation—until he’d said it to me. I always hated it about myself, that I couldn’t be tougher. Hated that I cried so hard when I saw a dead bird for the first time. Or that I used to bring home all the stray animals I found until Castle finally told me I had to stop, that we didn’t have the resources to keep them all. I was twelve. He made me let them go, and I cried for a week. I hated that I cried. Hated that I couldn’t help it. Everyone thinks I’m not supposed to give a shit—that I shouldn’t—but I do. I always do.

And I give a shit about this asshole, too.

So I take a tight breath and say, “Hey, man— Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” His response is fast. Cold.

I could let it go.

He's giving me an out. I should take it. I should take it and pretend I don't notice the strain in his jaw or the raw, red look around his eyes. I've got my own problems, my own burdens, my own pain and frustration, and besides, no one ever asks me about my day. No one ever follows up with me, no one ever bothers to peer beneath the surface of my smile. So why should I care?

I shouldn't.

Leave it alone, I tell myself.

I open my mouth to change the subject. I open my mouth to move on, and, instead, I hear myself say—

"C'mon, bro. We both know that's bullshit."

Warner looks away. A muscle jumps in his jaw.

"You had a hard day yesterday," I say. "It's all right to have a rough morning, too."

After a long pause, he says, "I've been up for a while."

I blow out a breath. It's nothing I wasn't expecting. "I'm sorry," I say. "I get it."

He looks up. Meets my eyes. "Do you?"

"Yeah. I do."

"I don't think you do, actually. In fact, I hope you don't. I wouldn't want you to know how I feel right now. I wouldn't wish that for you."

That hits me harder than I expect. For a moment I don't know what to say.

I decide to stare at the floor.

"Have you seen her yet?" I ask.

And then, so quietly I almost miss it—

"No."

Shit. This kid is breaking my heart.

"Don't feel sorry for me," he says, his eyes flashing as they meet mine.

"What? I don't— I'm not—"

"Get dressed," Warner says sharply. "I'll see you downstairs."

I blink, startled. "Right," I say. "Cool. Okay."

And then he's gone.

Two

I stand in the doorway for a minute, running my hands through my hair and trying to convince myself to move. I've developed a sudden headache. Somehow, I've become a magnet for pain. Other people's pain. My own pain. The thing is, I have no one to blame but myself. I ask the follow-up questions that land me here. I care too much. I make it my business when I shouldn't, and I only ever seem to get shit for it.

I shake my head and then—*wince*.

The only thing Warner and I seem to have in common is that we both like to blow off steam in the gym. I pushed too much weight the other day and didn't stretch afterward—and now I'm paying for it. I can hardly lift my arms.

I take a deep breath, arch my back. Stretch my neck. Try to work out the knots in my shoulder.

I hear someone whistle down the hall and I look up. Lily winks at me in an obvious, exaggerated way, and I roll my eyes. I'd really like to be flattered, because I'm not modest enough to deny that I have a nice body, but Lily could not give fewer shits about me. Instead, she does this—mocks me for walking around without a shirt on—nearly every morning. Her *and* Ian. Together. The two have been low-key dating for a couple of months now.

"Looking good, bro." Ian smiles. "Is that sweat or baby oil? You're so shiny."

I flip him off.

"Those purple boxers are really working for you, though," says Lily. "Nice choice. They suit your skin tone."

I shoot her an incredulous look. I might not be wearing a shirt, but I'm definitely—I glance down—wearing sweatpants. My underwear is nowhere in sight. "How could you *possibly* know the color of my boxers?"

"Photographic memory," she says, tapping her temple.

"Lil, that doesn't mean you have X-ray vision."

"You're wearing purple underwear?" Winston's voice—and a distinct whiff

of coffee—carries down the hall. “That’s inspired.”

“All right, fuck off, all of you.”

“Hey— Whoa— I thought you weren’t allowed to use foul language.” Winston comes into view, his boots heavy on the concrete floor. He’s fighting back a laugh when he says, “I thought you and Castle had an agreement.”

“That’s not true,” I say, pointing at him. “Castle and I agreed I could say *shit* as much as I wanted.”

Winston raises his eyebrows.

“Anyway,” I mutter, “Castle isn’t here right now, is he? So I stand by my original statement. Fuck off, all of you.”

Winston laughs, Ian shakes his head, and Lily pretends to look offended, when—

“I most definitely *am* here right now, and I heard that,” Castle calls from his office.

I cringe.

I used to swear profusely as a teenager—much worse than I do now—and it really used to upset Castle. He said he worried I’d never find a way to articulate my emotions without anger. He wanted me to slow down when I spoke, to use specific words to describe how I was feeling instead of angrily shouting obscenities. He seemed so worried about it that I agreed to tone down my language. But I made that promise four years ago, and as much as I love Castle, I often regret it.

“Kenji?” Castle again. I know he’s waiting for an apology.

I peer down the hall and spot his open door. We’re all squeezed up against each other, even with the new accommodations. Warner basically had to reinvent this floor, and it took a lot of work and sacrifice, so, again, I’m not complaining.

But still.

It’s hard not to be annoyed by the overwhelming lack of privacy.

“My bad,” I shout back.

I can actually hear Castle sigh, even from across the hall.

“A touching display of remorse,” Winston says.

“All right, show’s over.” I wave them all away. “I have to shower.”

“Yeah you do,” Ian says, raising an eyebrow.

I shake my head, exhausted. “I can’t believe I put up with you assholes.”

Ian laughs. “You know I’m messing with you, right?” When I don’t respond he says, “Seriously—you look good. We should hit the gym later. I need someone to spot me.”

I nod, only a little mollified, and mumble a goodbye. I head back into my room to grab my shower caddy, but Winston follows me in, leans against the

doorframe. It’s just then that I notice he’s holding a paper to-go cup.

My eyes light up. “Is that coffee?”

Winston pulls away from the door, horrified. “It’s *my* coffee.”

“Hand it over.”

“What? No.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Why can’t you get your own?” he says, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “This is only my second cup. You know it takes at least three before I’m even half awake.”

“Yeah, well, I have to be downstairs in five minutes or Warner’s going to murder me and I haven’t had any breakfast yet and I’m already exhausted and I really—”

“Fine.” Winston’s face darkens as he hands it over. “You monster.”

I take the cup. “I’m a goddamn *joy*.”

Winston mutters something foul under his breath.

“Hey”—I take a sip of the coffee—“by the way— Did you, uh—?”

Winston’s neck goes suddenly red. He averts his eyes. “No.”

I hold up my free hand. “Hey—no pressure or anything. I was just wondering.”

“I’m still waiting for the right time,” he says.

“Cool. Of course. I’m just excited for you, that’s all.”

Winston looks up. Shoots me an uncertain smile.

Winston’s been in love with Brendan for a long time, but I’m the only one who knows about it. Winston never thought Brendan would be interested, because as far as we knew, he’d only ever dated women, but a few months ago Brendan was linked, briefly, to this other dude from Point, and that was when Winston opened up to me about the whole thing. He asked me to keep it to myself, said he wanted to be the one to talk about it when it felt right, and he’s been trying to build up the courage to say something to Brendan ever since. The problem is that Winston thinks he’s a little old for Brendan, and he’s worried that if Brendan turns him down it might ruin their friendship. So he’s been waiting. For the right moment.

I clap him on the shoulder. “I’m happy for you, bro.”

Winston lets out a breathy, nervous laugh that’s unlike him. “Don’t be too happy just yet,” he says. And then he shakes his head as if to clear it. “Anyway—enjoy the coffee. I need to go get another one.”

I raise the coffee cup in a gesture that says both *thank you* and *goodbye*, and as I turn away to gather my things for a quick shower, my smile slips. Somehow I can’t help but be reminded, all the time, of my own solitude.

I kill the coffee in a couple of quick, deep pulls, and toss the cup. Quietly, I make my way to the shower, my movements mechanical as I turn on the water. Strip. Lather. Rinse. Whatever.

I'm frozen for a moment, watching the water pool in my upturned hands. I sigh, press my forehead to the cool, slick tile as the hot water pelts my back. I feel a measure of relief as my muscles begin to relax, the heat and steam releasing knots of tension under my skin. I try to focus on the luxury of this shower, on my gratitude for this miracle of hot water, but my less gracious thoughts keep circling me, pecking at my heart and mind like emotional vultures.

I'm so happy for my friends. I love them, even when they piss me off. I care about them. I want their joy. But it still hurts a little when it feels like, everywhere I look, everyone seems to have someone.

Everyone but me.

It's crazy how much I wish I didn't care. I wish, so much, all the time, that I didn't give a shit about this sort of thing—that I could be like Warner, a frozen, unforgiving island; or even like Adam, who's found his happiness in family, in his relationship with his brother—but I'm like neither. Instead, I'm a big, raw, bleeding heart, and I spend my days pretending not to notice that I want more. That I *need* more.

Maybe it sounds weird to say, but I know I could love the shit out of someone. I feel it, in my heart. This capacity to love. To be romantic and passionate. Like it's a superpower I have. A gift, even.

And I've got no one to share it with.

Everyone thinks I'm a joke.

I run my hands down my face, squeezing my eyes shut as I remember my interaction with Nazeera last night.

She came up to *me*, I try to remind myself.

I never approached her. I didn't even try to talk to her again, not after that day on the beach when she made it clear she wasn't even a little bit interested in me. Though it's not like I would've had a chance to talk to her after that, anyway; everything got crazy after that. J got shot and everyone was reeling, and then all that shit with Warner and Juliette went down, and now here we are.

But last night I was just minding my own business, still trying to figure out what to do about the fact that our supreme commander was slowly marinating in half a pint of Anderson's best whisky, when Nazeera came up to me. Out of the blue. It was right after dinner—hell, she wasn't even present at dinner—and she just showed up, like an apparition, cornering me as I was leaving the dining room. Literally backed me into a corner and asked me if it was true, that I had the power of invisibility.

She looked so mad. I was so confused. I didn't know how she knew and I didn't know why she cared, but there she was, right in front of me, demanding an answer, and I didn't see the harm in telling her the truth.

So I said yes, it was true. And she looked suddenly angrier.

"Why?" I said.

"Why what?" Her eyes flashed, big and wide and electric with feeling. She was wearing a leather hood, and the lights of a nearby chandelier glinted off the diamond piercing near her bottom lip. I couldn't stop staring at her mouth. Her lips were slightly parted. Full. Soft.

I forced myself to look up. "What?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought— I'm sorry, what are we talking about?"

She turned away, but not before I saw the look of disbelief on her face. There might've been outrage, too. And then, lightning fast, she spun back around. "Are you just pretending to be dumb all the time? Or do you always talk like you're drunk?"

I froze. Pain and confusion swirled in my head. Pain from the insult, and confusion from—

Yeah, I had no idea what was happening.

"What?" I said again. "I don't talk like I'm drunk."

"You're looking at me like you're drunk."

Shit, she was pretty.

"I'm not drunk," I said. Stupidly. And then I shook my head and remembered to be angry—she'd just insulted me, after all—and I said, "Anyway, you're the one who came after me, remember? You started this conversation. And I don't know why you're so mad— Hell, I don't even know why you care. It's not my fault that I can be invisible. It just happened to me."

And then she shoved her hood back from her face and her hair shook out, dark and silky and heavy, and she said something I didn't hear because my brain was freaking out, like, should I tell her that I can see her hair? Does she know that I can see her hair? Did she mean for me to see her hair? Would she freak out, right now, if I told her that I could see her hair? But then, also, just in case I wasn't supposed to be seeing her hair right now, I didn't want to tell her that I could see her hair because I was afraid she'd cover it up again, and, if I was being honest, I was really enjoying the view.

She snapped her fingers in my face.

I blinked. "What?" And then, realizing I'd overused that word tonight, I added a "Hmm?"

"You're not listening to me."

“I can see your hair,” I said, and pointed.

She took a deep, irritated breath. She seemed impatient. “I don’t always cover my hair, you know.”

I shook my head. “No,” I said dumbly. “I did not know that.”

“I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. It’s illegal, remember?”

I frowned. “Then why have you been covering your hair? And why’d you give me such a hard time about it?”

She unhooked the hood from around her shoulders and crossed her arms. Her hair was long. Dark. Her eyes were deep. They were a light, honey color, bright against her brown skin. She was so beautiful it was scaring me.

“I know a lot of women who lost the right to dress like that under The Reestablishment. There was a huge Muslim population in Asia, did you know that?”

She doesn’t wait for me to respond.

“I had to watch, quietly, as my own father sent down the decrees to have the women stripped. Soldiers paraded them into the streets and tore the clothing from their bodies. Ripped the scarves from their heads and publicly shamed them. It was violent and inhumane, and I was forced to bear witness. I was eleven years old,” she whispered. “I hated it. I hated my father for doing it. For making me watch. So I try to honor those women, when I can. For me, it’s a symbol of resistance.”

“Huh.”

Nazeera sighed. She looked frustrated, but then—she laughed. It wasn’t a funny laugh, it was more like a sound of disbelief, but I thought of it as progress. “I just told you something really important to me,” she said, “and all you can say is *huh*?”

I thought about it. And then, carefully:

“No?”

And somehow, for some unknowable reason, she smiled. She rolled her eyes as she did it, but her face lit up and she looked suddenly younger—sweeter—and I couldn’t stop staring at her. I didn’t know what I’d done to earn that look on her face. I’d probably done nothing to earn it. She was probably laughing at me.

I didn’t care.

“I, uh, think that’s really cool,” I said, remembering to say something. To acknowledge the importance of what she’d shared with me.

“You think *what’s* cool?” She raised an eyebrow.

“You know.” I nodded in the direction of her head. “Your whole—thing. That story. You know.”

That’s when she laughed for real. Out loud. She bit her lip to cut the sound

and she shook her head as she said, softly, “You’re not messing with me, are you? You’re just really bad at this.”

I blinked at her. I didn’t think I understood the question.

“You’re terrible at talking to me,” she said. “I make you nervous.”

I blanched. “I didn’t— I mean, I wouldn’t say that y—”

“I think maybe I’ve been a little hard on you,” she said, and sighed. She looked away. Bit her lip again. “I thought—that first night I met you—I thought you were trying to be an asshole. You know?” She met my eyes. “Like, I thought you were playing mind games with me. Being hot and cold on purpose. Insulting me one minute, asking me out the next.”

“What?” My eyes widened. “I’d never do that.”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I think I’m realizing that. Most of the guys I’ve known have been manipulative, condescending jackasses—my brother included—so I guess I wasn’t expecting you to be so . . . honest.”

“Oh.” I frowned. I wasn’t sure if she meant that to be a compliment. “Thank you?”

She laughed again. “I think we should start over,” she said, and held out her hand as if to shake mine. “I’m Nazeera. It’s nice to meet you.”

Tentatively, I took her hand. Held my breath. Her skin was smooth, soft against my calloused palm. “Hi,” I said. “I’m Kenji.”

She smiled. It was a happy, genuine smile. I had a feeling that smile was going to kill me. In fact, I was pretty sure this whole situation was going to kill me.

“That’s a great name,” she said, dropping my hand. “You’re Japanese, right?”

I nodded.

“Do you speak?”

I shook my head.

“Yeah. It’s tough. Beautiful but tough. I studied Japanese for a few years,” she explained, “but it’s a difficult language to master. I still have only a rudimentary grasp on it. I actually lived in Japan—well, what used to be Japan—for a month. I did a pretty extensive tour of the re-mapped Asian continent, actually.”

And then I think she asked me another question, but I’d gone suddenly deaf. I’d lost my head. She was talking to me about the country my parents were born in—a place that really means something to me—and I couldn’t even concentrate. She touched her mouth a lot. Ran her finger along the edge of her bottom lip a lot. She had a habit of tapping, often, at the diamond piercing there, and I’m not sure she was even aware she was doing it. But it was almost like she was telling

me—directing me—to look at her mouth. I couldn't help it. I was thinking about kissing her. I was thinking about a lot of things. Pinning her to the wall. Undressing her slowly. Running my hands down her naked body.

And then, suddenly—

Taking a cold shower.

All at once, her smile faded. Her voice was soft, a little concerned when she said, "Hey, are you okay?"

Not okay.

She was too close. She was too close and my body was definitely overreacting to her and I didn't know how to cool off. Shut down.

"Kenji?"

And then she touched my arm. She touched my arm and then seemed surprised she'd done it, just stared at her hand on my bicep and I forced myself to remain still, forced myself not to move a muscle as her fingertips grazed my skin and a wave of pleasure flooded my body so fast I felt suddenly drunk.

She dropped her hand and looked away. Looked back at me.

She looked confused.

"Shit," I said softly. "I think I might be in love with you."

And then, with a seismic jolt of terror, sense was knocked sideways into my head. I bolted upright in my own skin. I thought I might die. I thought I might actually *die* of embarrassment. I wanted to. I wanted to melt into the Earth. Evaporate. Disappear.

Jesus, I nearly did.

I couldn't believe I'd said the words out loud. I couldn't believe I'd been betrayed by my own goddamn mouth like that.

Nazeera stared at me, stunned and still processing, and somehow—through nothing short of a miracle—I managed to recover.

I laughed.

Laughed. And then I said, with perfect nonchalance, "I'm joking, obviously. I think I'm just exhausted. Anyway, good night."

I managed to walk, not run, back to my room, and was able to hold on to what was left of my dignity. I hope.

Then again, who the hell knows.

I'm going to have to see her again, probably very soon, and I'm sure she'll let me know if I should make plans to fly directly into the sun.

Shit.

I turn off the water and stand there, still sopping wet. And then, because I hate myself, I take a deep breath and turn on the cold water for ten, painful seconds.

It does the trick. Clears my head. Cools my heart.

I trip getting out of the shower.

I drag myself across the hall, forcing my legs to bend, but I'm still moving like I'm injured. I glance at the clock on the wall and swear under my breath. I'm late. Warner is going to kill me. I really need to spend an hour stretching—my muscles are still way too tight, even after a hot shower—but I have no time. And then, with a grimace, I realize that Warner was right. A couple extra hours to myself this morning would've done me a lot of good.

I sigh, heavily, and move toward my room.

I'm wearing my sweatpants, but I have only a towel draped around my neck because I'm in too much pain to pull a shirt over my head. I figure maybe I can steal one of Winston's button-downs—something I can slip on and off more easily than one of my own sweaters—when I hear someone's voice. I glance back, distracted, and in those two seconds I lose sight of where I'm going and slam into someone.

Someone.

Words fly out of my head. Just like that.

Gone.

I'm an idiot.

"You're *wet*," Nazeera says, wrinkling her nose as she jumps backward. "Why are you—"

And then I watch her, watch as she looks down. Looks up. Scans my body, slowly. I watch her look away and clear her throat, and suddenly she can't meet my eyes.

Hope blooms in my chest. Unlocks my tongue.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey." She nods. Crosses her arms. "Good morning."

"You need something?"

"Me? No."

I fight back a smile. It's strange to see her flustered. "Then what are you doing here?"

She's squinting at something behind me. "Do you—um, do you always walk around without a shirt on?"

I raise my eyebrows. "Up here? Yeah. Pretty much all the time."

She nods again. "I'll remember that." When I say nothing, she finally meets my eyes. "I was looking for Castle," she says quietly.

"His office is down that way"—I gesture with my head—"but he's probably made his way downstairs by now."

“Oh,” she says. “Thanks.”

She’s still looking at me. She’s still looking at me and it’s causing my chest to constrict. I take a step forward almost without realizing it. Wondering, just wondering. I don’t know what she’s thinking. I don’t know if I managed to screw everything up last night. But for some reason, right now—

She’s staring at my mouth.

Her eyes move up, meet mine, and then she’s staring at my mouth again. I wonder if she knows she’s doing it. I wonder if she has any idea what she’s doing to me. My lungs feel too small. My heart feels both fast and absurdly heavy.

When Nazeera meets my eyes again she takes a sudden, sharp breath. We’re so close I can feel her exhalation against my bare chest and I’m overwhelmed by a disorienting need to kiss her. I want to pull her into my arms and kiss her, and for a moment I actually think she might let me. Just the thought of it sends a thrill up my spine, a dizzying feeling that inspires my mind to jump too far, too fast. I can picture it with terrifying clarity—the fantasy of having her in my arms, her eyes dark and heavy with desire. I can imagine her under me, her fingers digging into my shoulder blades as she screams—

Jesus Christ.

I force myself to turn away. I almost slap myself in the face.

I’m not this guy. I’m not some fifteen-year-old boy who can’t keep his pants on. I’m not.

“I, uh, I have to get dressed,” I say, and even I can hear the unsteadiness in my voice. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

But then Nazeera’s hand is on my arm again, and my body stiffens, like I’m trying to contain something beyond myself. It’s wild. Desire like I’ve never known it before. I try to remind myself that that’s all this is, that it’s like what J said—I don’t even know this girl. I’m just going through something. I don’t know what, or why, but I’m just, like, clearly infatuated. I don’t even know her.

This isn’t real.

“Hey,” she says.

I hold still.

“Yeah?” I’m hardly breathing. I have to force myself to turn back an inch, meet her eyes.

“I wanted to tell you something. Last night. But I didn’t have the chance.”

“Oh.” I frown. “Okay.” There’s something in her voice that sounds almost like fear—and it clears my head in an instant. “Tell me.”

“Not here,” she says. “Not now.”

And I’m suddenly worried. “Is something wrong? Are you okay?”

“Oh—no— I mean, yeah— I’m fine. It’s just—” She hesitates. Offers me a half smile and a shrug. “I just wanted to tell you something. It’s nothing important.” She looks away, bites her lip. She bites that bottom lip a lot, I notice. “Well, it’s important to me, I guess.”

“Nazeera,” I say, enjoying the sound of her name in my mouth.

She looks up.

“You’re freaking me out a little. Are you sure you can’t tell me right now?”

She nods. Shoots me a tight smile. “No need to freak out, I promise. It’s really not a big deal. Maybe we can talk later tonight?”

My heart constricts again. “Sure.”

She nods once more. We say goodbye.

But when I glance back, not a second after I’ve started walking away, she’s already gone.

Disappeared.

Three

Warner is definitely pissed.

I'm super late, and Warner is waiting for me, perched carefully on a stiff chair in a conference room downstairs, staring at a wall.

I managed to snag a muffin on my way down, and I wipe quickly at my face, hoping I haven't left evidence around my mouth. I don't know how Warner feels about muffins, but I'm guessing he's not a fan.

"Hey," I say, and I sound out of breath. "What'd I miss?"

"This is my fault," he says, waving a hand around the room. He doesn't even look at me.

"I mean, I already *know* it's your fault," I say quickly, "but, like, just to be clear—what are we talking about?"

"This," he says. Finally, he looks at me. "This situation."

I wait.

"It's my fault," he says, pausing dramatically, "for thinking I could depend on you."

I make an effort not to roll my eyes. "All right, all right, calm down. I'm here now."

"You're thirty minutes late."

"Bro."

Warner looks suddenly tired. "The children of the supreme commanders of Africa and South America are here. They're waiting in the adjacent room."

"Yeah?" I raise an eyebrow. "So what's the deal? What do you need from me?"

"I need you to be present," he says sharply. "I'm not sure I know exactly why they're here, but all rational thought points to impending war. It's my suspicion that they're here to spy on us and send word back to their parents. They've sent their children to affect an air of camaraderie. A feeling of nostalgia. Maybe they think they can appeal to our new, young commander with other young faces. In any case, I think it's important for us to show a strong, united

front.”

“So no J, then, huh?”

Warner looks up. He seems stunned, and for a second I see something like pain in his eyes. I blink and he’s a statue again. “No,” he says. “I still haven’t seen her. And it’s more important than ever that they don’t know that.” He takes a breath. “Where’s Castle? He needs to be here, too.”

I shrug. “I thought he was already down here.”

“I saw him a moment ago. I’ll collect him.”

I drop down into a chair. “Cool.”

Warner walks to the door and then hesitates. Slowly, he turns to face me. “You’re having trouble again.”

I look up, surprised. “What?”

“In love. You’re having trouble in your love life. Is that why you were late?”

I feel the blood drain from my face. “How the hell would you know something like that?”

“You reek of it.” He nods at me, my body. “You’re practically emanating lovelorn agony.”

I stare at him, stunned. I don’t even know if it’s worth denying.

“It’s Nazeera, isn’t it?” Warner says. His eyes are clear, free of judgment.

I force myself to nod.

“Does she return your affections?”

I shoot him a belligerent look. “How the hell am I supposed to know?”

Warner smiles. It’s the first real emotion he’s shown all morning. “I suspected she might eviscerate you,” he says. “But I admit I thought she would use a knife.”

I force out a humorless: “Ha.”

“Be careful, Kishimoto. I find it necessary to remind you that she was raised to be lethal. I wouldn’t cross her.”

“Great,” I mutter, dropping my head in my hands. “I feel so good about this. Thanks for the pep talk.”

“You should also know that there’s something she’s hiding.”

My head snaps up. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, exactly. I only know she’s hiding something. I don’t yet know what it is. But I would advise you to tread cautiously.”

I feel suddenly ill, my forehead pinched with panic. I wonder about her cryptic message earlier. What it was she wanted to say to me last night. What she still might say to me—tonight.

And then I realize—

“Wait a second.” I frown. “Did you just give me dating advice?”

Warner tilts his head. A flicker of a smile again. “I’m merely returning the favor.”

I laugh, surprised. “Thanks, man. I appreciate that.”

He nods.

And then, with an elegant pivot, he opens the door and closes it behind him. The dude moves like a prince. He’s always dressed like a prince. Shiny boots and fitted suits and shit.

I sigh, irrationally irritated.

Am I jealous? Damn, maybe I’m jealous.

Warner always seems so pulled together. He’s always cold and cool. Always has a line, a comeback. A clear head. I bet he’s never struggled like I have with a girl. Never had to work so hard t—

Wow.

I’m an idiot.

I don’t know how I managed to forget that his girlfriend literally just broke up with him. *I was there.* I saw the fallout. Dude had a panic attack all over the floor. He was *crying*.

I sigh, hard, and run both hands through my hair.

I know it should make me feel better, but it only makes me feel worse to realize that Warner is just as prone to relationship failure as I am. It makes me think I don’t stand a chance with Nazeera.

Ugh, I hate everything.

I wait a couple of minutes for Warner and Castle to return, and while I’m waiting, I tug another muffin out of my pocket. I stress-eat it, ripping off huge chunks and blindly shoving them in my mouth.

When Castle walks through the door I’m nearly choking on muffin crumbs, but I wheeze through a quick hello. Castle frowns, clearly disapproving of my general state, and I pretend not to notice. I wave and try to swallow the last of the muffin. My eyes are tearing a little.

Warner steps inside, closes the door behind them. “Why do you insist on eating like an animal?” he snaps at me.

I frown, begin to speak, and he cuts me off with one hand.

“Don’t you *dare* speak to me with your mouth full.”

I swallow too quickly and nearly choke, but I force the rest of the muffin down. I clear my throat before saying, “You know what? I’m tired of this shit. You always make fun of the way I eat, and it’s not fair.”

Warner tries to speak and I cut him off.

“No,” I say. “I don’t eat like an animal. I just happen to be *hungry*. And maybe you should spend a few years starving to death before you think about

making fun of the way I eat, okay asshole?"

It's startling, how quickly it happens, but something changes in Warner's face. Not the tightness in his jaw or the furrow in his brow. But for a moment, the light goes out of his eyes.

He turns almost exactly forty-five degrees away from me. And his voice is solemn when he says, "They're waiting for us in the next room."

"I accept your apology," I say.

Warner looks back at me. Looks away.

Castle and I follow him out of the room.

Okay, maybe I missed something, but these new kids don't seem that scary. There's a set of twins—a boy and a girl—who speak to each other very quickly in Spanish, and a tall black guy with a British accent. Haider and Nazeera and Lena are conspicuously absent, but everyone is being polite and pretending not to notice. They're all pretty nice, actually. Especially Stephan, the son of the supreme commander of Africa. He seems cool; I'm getting fewer serial-killer vibes from him than I have from the other kids. But he's wearing a bracelet on his left hand, something silver set with thick, heavy red stones that look like rubies, and I can't stop feeling like I've seen something like it before. I keep staring, trying to figure out why it feels familiar, when, all of a sudden—

Juliette shows up.

At least, I think it's Juliette.

She looks like a different person.

She steps into the room wearing an outfit I've never seen her in, black from head to toe, and she looks good—beautiful, as always—but different. She seems harder. Angrier. I didn't think I'd like the short hair on her—last night it was a botched, haphazard job—but she must've cleaned it up this morning. The cut is a uniform crop throughout. A simple, sleek buzz cut.

She makes it work.

"Good morning," she says, and her voice is so hollow that, for a moment, I'm stunned. She manages to make those two words sound *mean*, and it's so unlike her that it scares me.

"Damn princess," I say softly. "Is that really you?"

She looks at me for only a second, but it feels more like she looks *through* me, and something about the cold, poisonous expression in her eyes breaks my heart like nothing else.

I don't know what happened to my friend.

And then, as if this shit couldn't get more dramatic, Lena busts through the door like a freaking debutante. She was probably waiting in the wings for the

right time to make her entrance. To throw Juliette off her game.

It doesn't work.

I watch, as if through water, as Juliette meets Lena for the first time. Juliette is stiff and superior, and I'm proud of her for being strong—but I can't recognize her in the moment.

J isn't like this.

She's not cold like this.

I've seen her get angry—hell, I've seen her lose her mind—but she's never been cruel. She's not *mean*. And it's not that I think Lena deserves better, because I don't. I don't give a shit about Lena. But this—this display—is so out of character for Juliette that it must mean she's hurting even more than I thought. More than I could've imagined. Like the pain has disfigured her.

I would know. I *know* her.

Warner might murder me if he knew I felt this way, but the truth is, I know Juliette better than anyone. Better than he does.

The math is simple: J and I have been closer, longer.

She and I have been through more shit together. We've had more time to talk about real things together. She's my closest friend.

Castle has been there for me, too, but he's like a father to me, and I can't talk to him or anyone else the way I do with Juliette. She's different. She gets me. I give her a lot of crap for being emotional all the time, but I love how empathetic she is. I love how she feels things so deeply that sometimes even joy manages to wound her. It's who she is. She's all heart.

And this—this version of her I'm seeing right now?

It's bullshit.

I can't accept it because I know it's not real. Because I know it means something is wrong.

Suddenly, a swell of angry voices breaks through my reverie.

I look up just in time to realize Lena has said something nasty. Valentina, one of the twins, turns on her, and I force myself to pay closer attention as she says—

"I should've cut off your ears when I had the chance."

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead.

I step forward, confused, and glance around the room for a clue, but a strange, uncomfortable tension has reduced everyone to silence.

"Uh, I'm sorry," I say, clearing my throat. "Am I missing something?"

More silence.

It's Lena who finally volunteers an explanation, but I already know better than to trust her when she says, "Valentina likes to play pretend."

Nicolás, the other twin, rounds on her in an instant, furiously firing back in

Spanish. Valentina pats her brother on the shoulder. “No,” she says, “you know what? It’s okay. Let her talk. Lena thinks I like to pretend”—she says a word in Spanish—“I won’t be pretending”—more words in Spanish.

Stephan’s mouth drops open in what appears to be shock, but Lena just rolls her eyes, so I have no idea what just happened.

I frown. It’s a frustrating conversation to follow.

But when I glance over at Juliette I realize, with welcome relief, that I’m not the only one feeling this way; J doesn’t understand what they’re talking about, either. Neither does Castle. And just as I think that Warner must be confused, too, he starts talking to Valentina in fluent Spanish.

Suddenly my head is spinning.

“Damn, bro,” I say. “You speak Spanish, too, huh? I’m going to have to get used to this.”

“We all speak many languages,” Nicolás says to me. He still seems a little irritated, but I’m grateful for the explanation. “We have to be able to communi __”

Juliette cuts him off angrily. “Listen, guys, I don’t care about your personal dramas. I have a massive headache and a million things to do today, and I’d like to get started.”

Ha.

Of course. Juliette has a hangover.

I bet she’s never had a hangover. And if this weren’t, like, a life or death situation, I’d think it was kind of hilarious.

Nicolás says something softly in response to her, and then drops his head in a mini-bow.

I cross my arms. I don’t trust him.

“What?” Juliette stares at him, confused. “I don’t know what that means.”

Nicolás smiles at her. He says something else in Spanish—and by now it’s obvious he’s screwing with her—and I nearly kick the little shit in the face.

Warner gets to him before I do. He says something to Nicolás, something else I don’t understand, but somehow this makes Juliette angrier.

What a weird morning.

I hear Nicolás say, “We are pleased to meet you,” in English, and I’m officially so goddamn confused I think I should just see myself out.

Juliette says, “I take it you’ll all be attending the symposium today?”

Another douche-bow from Nicolás. More words in Spanish.

“That’s a yes,” Warner translates.

That seems to piss her off. She spins around, turns to face him. “What other languages do you speak?” she says, her eyes flashing, and Warner goes so

suddenly still my heart hurts for him.

This moment is too real.

Warner and Juliette are both so full of shit today. They're pretending to be so hard, so cool and collected, and then—*this*. Juliette says one thing to him and Warner turns into an idiot. He's staring at her, too dumb to speak, and she's flushed, looking all hot and bothered just because he's looking at her.

Jesus.

I wonder if Warner has any idea what he looks like right now, staring at Juliette like all the words were shoved right out of his head, and then, with a jolt, I wonder if that's what I looked like when I was talking to Nazeera.

An involuntary shudder runs through me.

Finally, Stephan puts Warner out of his misery. He clears his throat and says, "We were taught many languages from a very young age. It was critical that the commanders and their families all knew how to communicate with one another."

Juliette looks down, collects herself. When she turns to Stephan, her face has lost most of its flush, but she still looks a little blotchy.

"I thought The Reestablishment wanted to get rid of all the languages," Juliette says. "I thought you were working toward a single, universal language —"

"*Sí*, Madam Supreme," Valentina says. (I know the word *sí*. It means yes. I'm not a complete idiot.) "That's true," she says. "But first we had to be able to speak with each other, no?"

And then—

I don't know why, but something about Valentina's response breaks something open in Juliette. She looks almost like herself again. Her face loses its tension. Her eyes are wide—almost sad.

"Where are you from?" she says quietly, and her voice is so unguarded it gives me hope—hope that the real J is still in there, somewhere. "Before the world was remapped," she says, "what were the names of your countries?"

"We were born in Argentina," the twins say.

"My family is from Kenya," Stephan says.

"And you've visited each other?" Juliette turns, scans their faces. "You travel to each other's continents?"

They nod.

"Wow," she says. "That must be incredible."

"You must come visit us, too, Madam Supreme," Stephan says, smiling. "We'd love to have you stay with us. After all," he says, "you are one of us now."

And just like that, Juliette's smile is gone.

Her face closes off. Shutters shut. She reverts back to the cold shell of a person she was when she walked in, and her voice is severe when she says, “Warner, Castle, Kenji?”

I clear my throat. “Yeah?”

I hear Castle say, “Yes, Ms. Ferrars?”

I glance over at Warner, but he doesn’t say a word. He only stares at her.

“If we’re done here, I’d like to speak with the three of you alone, please.”

I look from Warner to Castle, waiting for someone to say something, but no one does.

“Uh, yeah,” I say quickly. “No, uh, no problem.” I shoot Castle a look, like, *What the hell?* And he jumps in with a “Certainly.”

Warner is still staring at her. He says nothing.

I almost slap him.

Juliette seems to agree with my line of thinking, because she stalks off, looking extremely pissed off as she goes, and I start following her out the door when I feel a hand on my shoulder. A heavy hand.

I look up directly into Warner’s eyes, and, I’m not going to lie—it’s a disorienting experience. That dude has some wild eyes. Pale, ice green. It’s a little unnerving.

“Give me a minute with her,” he says.

I nod. Take a step back. “Yeah, whatever you need.”

And he’s gone. I hear him call after her, and I stand there awkwardly, watching the open door and ignoring the other kids in the room. I cross my arms. Clear my throat.

“So it’s true, then,” Stephan says.

I turn, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“They really love each other.” He nods toward the open door. “Those two.”

“Yeah,” I say, confused. “It’s true.”

“We’ve heard about it, of course,” Nicolás says. “But it’s interesting to witness in person.”

“Interesting?” I raise an eyebrow. “Interesting how?”

“It’s rather moving,” Valentina says, and she sounds like she means it.

Castle walks up to me then. “It’s been at least a minute,” he says quietly.

“Right.” I nod. “Well, we’ll see you kids later,” I say to the room. “If you guys haven’t had breakfast yet, feel free to grab some muffins from the kitchen. They’re good. I had two.”

Four

I nearly stumble trying to stop in place when we get out into the hall. Warner and Juliette haven't gone far, and they're standing close together, clearly having a heated, important conversation.

"We should get out of here," I say to Castle. "They need space to talk."

But Castle doesn't answer right away. He's staring at them with an intense look on his face, and for the first time in my life, I see him differently.

Like I don't know him.

After everything Warner told me yesterday—about how Castle always knew Juliette had a complicated history, knew she was a critical asset, knew she'd been adopted, knew that her biological parents had donated her to The Reestablishment and that he'd sent *me* on an undercover mission to collect her—I've felt a little strange. Not bad, exactly. Just strange. All this isn't enough of a revelation for me to lose faith in Castle entirely; he and I have been through too much for me to doubt his love.

But I feel off.

Unsettled.

I want to ask him why he kept all this from me. I want to demand an explanation. But for some reason, I can't bring myself to do it. Not yet, anyway. I think maybe I'm afraid to hear the answers to my own questions. I worry about what they might reveal about *me*.

"Yes," Castle finally says, the sound of his voice refocusing my thoughts. "Perhaps we should give them the space they need."

I shoot him an uncertain look. "You don't think they're good together, huh?"

Castle turns to me, surprised. "On the contrary," he says. "I think they're lucky to have found each other in this hellish world. But if they want a chance at happiness, they'll have to continue to heal. Individually." He turns away again, studies their figures in the distance. "I worry, sometimes, about the secrets between them. I want them to do the hard work of sucking out the poison from their past."

“Gross.”

Castle smiles. “Indeed.” He wraps his arm around my shoulder. Squeezes. “My greatest wish for you,” he says, “is for you to see yourself the way that I do: as a brilliant, handsome, compassionate young man who would do anything for the people he loves.”

I pull back, surprised. “What made you say that?”

“It’s just something I’ve been reminding myself to say out loud.” He sighs. “I want you to understand that Nazeera is a very, very lucky girl to be the object of your affections. I wish you would realize that. She is accomplished and beautiful, yes, but you—”

“Wait. What?” I feel suddenly nauseous. “How did y—?”

“Oh,” Castle says, his eyes wide. “Oh, was it a secret? I didn’t realize it was a secret. My apologies.”

I grumble something foul.

He laughs. “I have to say, if you’re interested in keeping it to yourself, you might want to change your tactics.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “You don’t see yourself around her. Your feelings are obvious to everyone. From anywhere.”

I drop my head into my hands with a groan.

And when I finally look up, ready to respond, I’m so distracted by the scene in front of me that I forget to speak.

Warner and Juliette are having a *moment*.

A pretty passionate moment, right here, in the hall. I realize, as I watch them, that I’ve never seen them kiss before. I’m frozen. A little stunned. And I know I should, like, look away—I mean, I know in my head that I should? That it’s the decent thing to do? But I’m kind of fascinated.

They clearly have crazy chemistry.

Their relationship never made a lot of sense to me—I couldn’t understand how someone like Warner could be an emotional partner to anyone, much less someone like Juliette: a girl who eats, sleeps, and breathes emotion. I rarely saw him emote *anything*. I worried that Juliette was giving him too much credit, that she put up with too much of his bullshit in exchange for—I don’t even know what. A sociopath with an extensive coat collection?

Mostly, I worried that she wasn’t getting the kind of love she deserved.

But now, suddenly—

Their relationship makes sense. Suddenly everything she’s ever said to me about him makes sense. I still don’t think I understand Warner, but it’s obvious that something about her lights a fire in him. He looks alive when she’s in his

arms. Human like I've never seen him before.

Like he's in love.

And not only in love, but beyond salvation. When they break apart they both look a little crazy, but Warner looks especially unhinged. His body is shaking. And when she suddenly takes off running down the hall, I know this won't end well.

My heart aches. For both of them.

I watch as Warner slumps back, against the wall, sinking into the stone until his limbs give out. He collapses onto the floor.

"I'll talk to him," Castle says, and the devastated look on his face surprises me. "You go find Ms. Ferrars. She shouldn't be alone right now."

I take a tight breath. "Got it." And then: "Good luck."

He only nods.

I have to pound on Juliette's door a few times before she finally opens it. She cracks it open an inch, says, "Never mind," and then tries to slam it closed.

I catch the door with my boot.

"Never mind what?" I lean my shoulder into the door, and with a little shove, I manage to squeeze my way inside. "What's going on?"

She stalks across the room, as far away from me as she can get.

I don't understand this. I don't understand why she's treating me like this. And I open my mouth to say exactly that when she says—

"Never mind, I don't want to talk to any of you. Please go away. Or maybe you can all go to hell. I don't actually care."

I flinch. Her words land like physical blows. She's talking to me like I'm the enemy, and I can't believe it. "Are you—wait, are you serious right now?"

"Nazeera and I are leaving for the symposium in an hour," she snaps at me. She still won't look at me, though. "I have to get ready."

"What?" First of all, when the hell did she become best friends with Nazeera? And second of all: "What's happening, J? What's wrong with you?"

She spins around, her face a stunning caricature. She looks mutinous. "*What's wrong with me?* Oh, like you don't know?"

The force of her anger sends me a step back. I remind myself that this girl could probably kill me with the twitch of her hand if she wanted to. "I mean, I heard about what happened with Warner, yeah, but I'm pretty sure I just saw you guys making out in the hallway, so I'm, uh, really confused—"

"He *lied* to me, Kenji. He lied to me this whole time. About so many things. And so did Castle. So did *you*—"

"Wait, what?" This time I grab her arm before she has a chance to walk away

again. “Wait—I didn’t lie to you about shit. Don’t mix me up in this mess. I had nothing to do with any of it. Hell, I still haven’t figured out what to say to Castle. I can’t believe he kept all of this from me.”

Juliette goes suddenly still. Her eyes widen, bright with unshed tears. And then, finally, I understand. She thought I’d betrayed her, too.

“You weren’t in on all this?” she whispers. “With Castle?”

“Uh-uh. No way.” I take a step forward. “I had no clue about any of this insanity until Warner told me about it yesterday.”

She stares at me, still uncertain.

And I can’t help it; I roll my eyes.

“Well, how am I supposed to trust you?” she says, her voice breaking. “Everyone’s been lying to me—”

“J,” I say, “c’mon.” I shake my head, hard. I can’t believe I even have to say this. I can’t believe she doubted me—that she didn’t talk to me about this sooner. “You know me,” I say to her. “You know I don’t bullshit. That’s not my style.”

A single tear escapes down the side of her face and the sight of it is simultaneously heartbreaking and reassuring. This is the girl I know. The friend I love. She’s all heart.

She whispers, “You promise?”

“Hey.” I hold out my hand. “Come here, kid.”

She still seems a little skeptical, but she takes the necessary steps forward and I reel her in, pulling her against my chest and squeezing tight. She’s so tiny. Like a little bird with hollow bones. You’d never know she was technically invincible. That she could probably melt the skin off my face if she wanted to. I squeeze a little tighter, run a hand up and down her back in a comforting, familiar gesture, and I feel her finally relax. I feel the exact moment when the tension leaves her body, when she collapses fully against my chest. Her tears soak through my shirt, hot and unrelenting.

“You’re going to be okay,” I whisper. “I promise.”

“Liar.”

I smile. “Well, there’s a fifty percent chance I’m right.”

“Kenji?”

“Mm?”

“If I find out you’re lying to me about any of this, I swear to God I will rip all the bones out of your body.”

I almost choke on a sudden, surprised laugh. “Uh, yeah, okay.”

“I’m serious.”

“Uh-huh.” I pat her head. So fuzzy.

“I will.”

“I know, princess. I know.”

We settle into a comfortable silence, the two of us still holding on, and I’m thinking about how important this relationship is to me—how important Juliette is to me—when she says, suddenly:

“Kenji?”

“Mm?”

“They’re going to destroy Sector 45.”

“Who is?”

“Everyone.”

Shock straightens my spine. I pull back, confused. “Everyone who?”

“All the other supreme commanders,” Juliette says. “Nazeera told me everything.”

And then, suddenly, I get it.

Her new friendship with Nazeera.

This must be the secret Warner said she was hiding—Nazeera must be a traitor to The Reestablishment. It’s either that, or she’s lying to all of us.

The latter doesn’t seem likely, though.

Maybe I’m being foolishly optimistic, but Nazeera practically said as much to me the other night with her whole speech about wearing a symbol of resistance and hating her dad and honoring the women he shamed.

Maybe Nazeera’s big secret is that she’s actually here to help us. Maybe there’s nothing to be afraid of. Maybe the woman is just *perfect*.

I’m suddenly grinning like an idiot. “So Nazeera is one of the good guys, huh? She’s on our team? Trying to help you out?”

“Oh my God, Kenji, please focus—”

“I’m just saying.” I hold up my hands, take a step back. “The girl is fine as hell is all I’m saying.”

Juliette is looking at me like I’ve lost my mind, but she laughs. She sniffs, gently, and brushes away a few forgotten tears.

“So.” I nod, encouraging her to speak. “What’s the deal? The details? Who’s coming? When? How? Et cetera?”

“I don’t know,” Juliette says, shaking her head. “Nazeera is still trying to figure it out. She thinks maybe in the next week or so? The kids are here to monitor me and send back information, but they’re coming to the symposium, specifically, because the commanders want to know how the other sector leaders will react to seeing me. Nazeera says she thinks the information will help inform their next moves. I’m guessing we have maybe a matter of *days*.”

My eyes go painfully wide. A matter of *days* was not what I was expecting to hear. I was hoping for months. Weeks, at the very least.

This is bad.

“Oh,” I say. “Shit.”

“Yeah.” Juliette shoots me a beleaguered look. “But when they decide to obliterate Sector 45, their plan is to also take me prisoner. The Reestablishment wants to bring me back in, apparently. Whatever that means.”

“Bring you back in?” I frown. “For what? More testing? Torture? What do they want to do with you?”

“I have no idea,” Juliette says, shaking her head. “I have no clue who these people are. My sister is apparently still being tested and tortured somewhere. So I’m pretty sure they’re not bringing me back for a big family reunion, you know?”

“Wow.” I look away. Blow out a breath. “That is some next-level drama.”

“Yeah.”

“So—what are we going to do?” I say.

Juliette studies me for a second. Her eyes pull together. “I mean, I don’t know, Kenji. They’re coming to kill everyone in Sector 45. I really don’t think I have a choice.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure I’ll have to kill them first.”

Five

I leave Juliette's room in a daze. It doesn't seem right that so much horrible shit should be, like, *allowed* to go down in such a short period of time. There should be a fail-safe in the universe somewhere, something that automatically shuts down in the event of extreme human stupidity. Maybe an emergency lever. A button, even.

This is *ridiculous*.

I sigh, feeling suddenly sick to my stomach.

I guess we'll have to wait to discuss all this tonight, after the symposium, which is going to be its own kind of shitshow. There doesn't seem to be a point to attending the symposium now, but Juliette said she didn't want to bail, not this late in the game, so we're all supposed to make nice and act like everything is normal. Six hundred sector leaders gathered in the same room and we're supposed to make nice and act like everything is normal. I don't get it. It's no secret to anyone that we, as a sector, have betrayed the entire establishment, so I don't understand why we're even bothering to pretend. But Castle says maintaining these pretenses means something to the system, so we have to follow through. Jumping ship now is basically like flipping off the rest of the continent. It'd be a declaration of war.

Honestly, the ridiculousness of this whole thing would almost be funny if I didn't think we were all probably going to die.

What a day.

I spot Sonya and Sara on my way back to my room and I nod a quick greeting, but Sara grabs my arm.

"Have you seen Castle?" she says.

"We've been trying to get ahold of him for an hour," says Sonya.

The urgency in their voices sends a sudden spike of fear through my body, and the viselike grip Sara's still got on my arm isn't helping. It's not like either of them to be so anxious; for as long as I've known them, these two have always

been gentle and generally calm—through everything.

"What's wrong?" I say. "What's going on? Anything I can do to help?"

They shake their heads at the same time. "We need to talk to Castle."

"Last I saw him, he was downstairs, talking to Warner. Why don't you page him? He's always wearing his earpiece."

"We've tried," Sonya says. "Several times."

"Can you at least tell me what this is about? Just so I don't have a heart attack?"

Sara's eyes widen. "Have you been experiencing chest pains?"

"Have you been feeling unusually lethargic?" Sonya chimes in.

"Shortness of breath?" Sara again.

"What? No. Guys, stop—I meant that as a figure of speech. I'm not actually going to have a heart attack. I'm just—I'm worried."

Sonya ignores me. She rummages around in the messenger bag she carries around in case of emergencies and unearths a small medicine bottle. She and Sara are twins and our resident healers—and they're an interesting combination of gentle but extremely serious. They're doctors with the perfect bedside manner, and they never let any mention of pain, illness, or injury go ignored. Once, back at Point, I said casually that I was sick and tired of being underground all the time, and the two of them forced me into a bed and demanded I give them a list of my symptoms. When I was finally able to explain that I'd been joking—that "sick and tired" was just a thing people say sometimes—they didn't think it was funny. They were irritated with me for a week after that.

"Take this with you, as a precaution," Sonya says, and presses the blue, cylindrical bottle into my hand. "As you know, Sara and I have been working on this for a while, but this is the first time we feel like it might be ready for the field. That," she says, nodding at the bottle in my hand, "is one of the test batches, but we haven't had any trouble with it. Actually, we think it might be ready for production."

That gets my attention.

I stare in awe at the bottle in my hand. It's heavy. Glass. "No way," I say softly. "You did it?" I look up, look into their eyes.

They smile at exactly the same time.

These two have been working on creating healing pills for as long as I can remember. They wanted to give us something to take on the road—in the middle of battle—to keep us going if and/or when they're not around.

"Did James work on this at all?"

Sonya smiles wider. "He helped."

“Yeah?” I smile, too. “How’s his training going? Everything okay?”

They nod. “We’re about to go pick him up, actually,” Sara says. “For his afternoon session. He’s a fast study. He’s growing into his powers nicely.”

Almost without realizing it, I stand up a bit taller, puff my chest like a peacock. I don’t know what right I have to feel proprietary about that kid, but I’m so proud of him.

I know he’s got a big future ahead of him.

“All right, well”—I hold up the bottle—“thank you for this. I’m going to take it with me, because”—I shake the bottle—“this is amazing. But don’t worry. Seriously. I’m not going to have a heart attack.”

“Good,” they both say.

I grin. “So you want me to tell Castle you’re looking for him?”

They nod.

“And you’re not going to tell me what the urgency is all about?”

Sara and Sonya exchange glances.

I raise an eyebrow.

Finally, Sara says—

“Do you remember when Juliette was shot?”

“She was shot three days ago, Sara.” I offer her an incredulous look. “I’m not likely to forget.”

Sonya jumps in and says, “Yes, but, the thing you don’t know—the thing that no one but Warner and Castle know—is that something happened to Juliette when she was shot. Something we weren’t able to heal.”

“What?” I say sharply. “What do you mean?”

“There was some kind of poison in the bullets,” Sara explains. “Something that was giving her hallucinations.”

I stare, horrified.

“We’ve been studying the properties of the poison for days, trying to come up with an antidote,” she says. “Instead, we discovered something . . . unexpected. Something even more important.”

After a beat of silence, I can’t take it anymore.

“And?” I say, gesturing with my hand that they should continue.

“We really want to tell you everything,” Sonya says, “but we have to speak to Castle first. He needs to be the first to know.” She hesitates. “I can only tell you that we think we’ve discovered something that directly corresponds with the tattoos on the dead body of Juliette’s assailant.”

“That guy Nazeera killed,” I say, remembering. “She saved Juliette’s life.”

They nod.

Another spike of fear spears through me.

“All right,” I say, trying to keep my voice light, steady. I don’t want to freak them out with my own worries. “Okay. I’ll tell Castle to come find you right away. Will you be in the medical wing?”

They nod again.

And then, as I walk away, Sara calls after me.

I turn around.

“Tell him—” She hesitates again, and then seems to make a decision. “Tell him it’s about Sector 241. Tell him we think it’s a message. From Nouria.”

“What?” I freeze in place, disbelieving. “That’s impossible.”

“Yes,” Sara says. “We know.”

I take the stairs.

I don’t have time to wait for the elevator, and besides, my body is too full of nervous energy right now to stand still. I take the stairs two, three at a time, flying even as I keep a hand on the handrail to steady myself.

I didn’t think this day could get crazier.

Nouria.

Shit.

I don’t know how Castle will react to hearing her name. He hasn’t heard a word from Nouria in years. Not since—well, not since the boys were murdered. Castle told me he gave Nouria space because he thought she needed time. He figured they’d find their way back to each other again after she recovered. But after the sectors were erected, it became near impossible to contact loved ones. The internet was one of the first things The Reestablishment took away, and without it the world became—in an instant—a bigger, scarier place. Everything was harder. Everyone felt helpless. I don’t think anyone realized just how much we relied on the internet for literally everything until the lights went off. Computers and phones were taken away. Destroyed. Hackers were found and publicly hanged.

Borders were closed without clearance.

And then The Reestablishment tore families apart. On purpose. In the beginning they pretended they were doing it for the good of humanity. They called it a new form of integration. They said race relations were at their worst because we were all so isolated from one another, and that part of the problem was that people had built these extensive family units—The Reestablishment referred to big families as dynasties—and that these dynasties only reinforced homogeneity within homogenous communities. They said that the only way to fix this was to rip those dynasties apart. They ran algorithms that helped them manufacture diversity by rebuilding communities with specific ratios.

But it wasn't long before they stopped pretending to give a shit about diverse communities. Soon, small infractions alone would be enough to have you taken from your family. Show up late to work one day and sometimes they'd send you—or worse, someone you loved—across the planet. So far away you'd never be able to find your way back.

That's what happened to Brendan. He was torn from his family and sent here, to Sector 45, when he was fifteen. Castle found him and took him in. Lily, too. She's from what used to be Haiti. They took her from her parents when she was only twelve. They put her in a group home with a ton of other displaced children. They were glorified orphanages.

I ran away from one of those orphanages when I was eight.

Sometimes I think that's why I care about James so much. I feel connected to him, in a way. When we were on base together Adam never told me that his little brother practically lived in one of those orphanages. It wasn't until that day when we were on the run—when James and I had to hide out together while Adam and Juliette tried to find a car—that I realized where we were. I took one glance around those grounds and I saw that place for what it was.

All those kids.

James was luckier than the other children—not only did he have a living relative, but he had a relative who lived close by, one who could afford to keep him in a private apartment. But when I asked James about his "school" and his "friends" and about Benny, the woman who was supposed to bring him his government-issue meals on a regular basis, I got all the answers I needed.

James got to sleep in his own bed at night, but he spent his days in an orphanage, with other orphaned children. Adam paid Benny a little extra to keep an eye on James, but ultimately, her loyalty was to a paycheck. At the end of the day, James was a ten-year-old kid living all alone.

Maybe all this is why I feel like I understand Adam. Why I fight for him, even when he's a dick. He comes off as an angry, explosive guy—and sometimes he really is an asshole—but it must be hard to watch your kid brother live all alone on a compound for tortured, abandoned children. It slowly kills your soul to watch a ten-year-old kid sob and scream in the middle of the night because his nightmares keep getting worse, and no matter what you do, you can't seem to make it better.

I lived with Adam and James for months. I saw the cycle every night. And I watched, every night, as Adam tried to calm James down. How he'd rock his little brother in his arms until the sun came up. I think James is finally doing better, but sometimes I'm not sure Adam will ever recover from the blows he's been dealt. It's obvious he has PTSD. I don't think he even sleeps anymore. I

think he’s slowly losing his mind.

And sometimes I wonder—

If I had to live with that every day, I wonder if it would make me crazy, too. Because it’s not the pain that’s unendurable. It’s the hopelessness. It’s the hopelessness that makes you reckless.

I would know.

It only took two hours in the orphanage before I realized I couldn’t trust adults anymore, and by the time Castle found me on the run—a nine-year-old kid trying to keep warm in a shopping cart on the side of the road—I was so disillusioned with the world I thought I’d never recover. It took a long time for Castle to earn my trust completely; in the beginning, I spent all my free time picking locked doors and sneaking through his things when I thought he wasn’t looking. The day he found me, sitting in his closet inspecting the contents of an old photo album, I was so sure he would take a bat to my back I nearly ruined my pants. I was terrified, unconsciously flickering in and out of invisibility. But instead of yelling at me, he sat down next to me and asked me about my family; I’d only ever told him that they were dead. He wanted to know now if I’d tell him what happened. I shook my head repeatedly. I wasn’t ready to talk. I didn’t think I’d ever be ready to talk.

He didn’t get angry.

He didn’t even seem to mind that I’d ransacked his personal belongings. Instead, he picked up the photo album in my lap and told me about his own family.

It was the first time I’d ever seen him cry.

Six

When I finally find Castle, he's not alone. And he's not okay.

Nazeera, Haider, Warner, and Castle are leaving a conference room at the same time, and only the siblings look like they're not about to vomit.

I'm still breathing hard, having just raced down six flights of stairs, and I sound winded when I say, "What's going on?" I nod at Warner and Castle. "Why do you two look so freaked out?"

"Let's discuss it later," Castle says quietly. He won't look at me.

"I have to go," Warner says, and bolts. Down the hall and far, far away.

I watch him leave.

Castle is about to slip away, too, but I grab his arm. "Hey," I say, forcing him to meet my eyes. "The girls need to talk to you. It's critical."

"Yes," he says, and he sounds strained. "I just saw all their messages. I'm sure it can wait until after the symposium. I need a minute to—"

"It can't wait." I hold his gaze. "It's *critical*."

Finally, Castle seems to grasp the gravity of what I'm trying to relay. His shoulders stiffen. His eyes narrow.

"Nouria," I say.

And Castle looks so stunned I worry he might fall over.

"I wouldn't bring you a bullshit message, sir. Go. Now. They're waiting in the medical wing."

And then he's gone, too.

"Who's Nouria?"

I look up to see Haider studying me curiously.

"His cat," I say.

Nazeera fights back a smile. "Castle received an urgent message from his cat?"

"I didn't know he had a cat," Haider says, his brows furrowing. He has a slight accent, unlike Nazeera, but his English is flawless. "I haven't seen any animals on base. Are you allowed to keep animals as pets in Sector 45?"

“Nah. But don’t worry, it’s an invisible cat.”

Nazeera tries and fails to force back a laugh. She coughs, hard. Haider looks at her, confused, and I watch for the moment he realizes I’ve been screwing with him. And then—

He glares at me. “*Hemar*.”

“Say what?”

“He just called you an ass,” Nazeera explains.

“Wow. Nice.”

“*Hatha shlon damaghsiz*,” Haider says to his sister. “Let’s go.”

“Okay—wait—*that* sounded like it might be a compliment.”

“Nope.” Nazeera smiles wider. “He just said you’re an idiot.”

“Cool. Well, I’m glad to be learning all these important words in Arabic.”

Haider shakes his head, outraged. “This was not meant to be a lesson.”

I stare at him for a moment, genuinely baffled. “Your brother has no sense of humor, huh?” I say to Nazeera.

“He’s not good with subtlety,” she says, still smiling at me. “You have to knock him over the head with a joke or he doesn’t get it.”

I place a hand over my heart. “Wow, I’m so sorry. That must be so difficult for you.”

She laughs but quickly bites her lip to kill the sound. And she sounds serious when she says, “You have no idea.”

Haider frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“You see what I mean?” she says.

I laugh, staring into her eyes for just a second too long. Haider shoots me a murderous look.

I take that as my cue to leave.

“All right, yeah,” I say, and take a quick breath. “I better get going. Symposium starts in”—I glance at my watch; my eyes widen—“thirty minutes. Shit.” I look up. “Bye.”

This thing is a *scene*.

There are around six hundred commanders and regents—officers at the same level as Warner—in the audience, and the place is buzzing. People are still settling in, taking their seats, and Juliette is up at the podium. The group of us are standing behind her, onstage with her, and I’m not going to lie—it feels a little risky. We’re perfect targets for any psycho who might show up with a gun. We’ve taken precautions of course—no one is supposed to be allowed in here with any kind of weapon—but that doesn’t mean it can’t happen. But we all agreed that standing united like this would send the strongest message. The girls

remained back on base—we decided it would be best for them to stay safe long enough to save us if we get injured—and James and Adam are MIA. Castle said that Adam doesn't want to participate in anything even remotely hostile anymore. Not unless he has to.

I get it.

In my less charitable moments I might call him a coward, but I get it. I'd opt out, too, if I could. I just don't feel like I can.

There's still too much I'm willing to die for.

Anyway. Juliette is pretty much invincible, so as long as she keeps her Energy on, she should be fine. The rest of us are vulnerable—but at the first sign of danger we're supposed to scatter. We're too outnumbered to fight; our best chance of survival is to spread out, spread far.

That's the plan.

That's the whole goddamn plan.

We hardly even had time to talk about the plan, because everything has been so insane lately, but Castle gave us all a quick pep talk before J took the stage, and that was it. That was all we were going to get. A quick *good luck and I hope you don't die*.

I'm definitely nervous.

I shift my weight, feeling suddenly restless, as the crowd goes still. It's a sea of military faces, the iconic red/green/blue stripes of The Reestablishment emblazoned on every uniform. I know they're regular people—blood and guts and bones—but they look like machines. And they turn their heads up at the same time, eyes blinking in unison as Juliette begins to speak.

It's creepy as hell.

We always knew that no one outside of Sector 45 would willingly accept Juliette as their new supreme commander, but it's chilling to witness in person. They clearly have no respect for Juliette, and as she talks about her love for the people, for the hardworking men and women whose lives were stripped for parts, I can see them strain to contain their anger. There's a reason so many are still loyal to The Reestablishment—and the proof of it is right here, in this room. These people are paid better. They're given perks, privileges. I never would've believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, but once you see the things people are willing to do for an extra bowl of rice, you can't unsee it. The Reestablishment keeps their higher-ups happy. They don't have to mingle with the masses. They get to keep their finery and live in real homes on unregulated territory.

These men and women sneering at Juliette as she speaks—they don't want her version of the world. They don't want to lose their rank and the privileges

that rank affords. Everything she's saying about the failures of The Reestablishment, about the need to start over and give the people back their homes, their families, their *voices*—

Her words are a threat to their livelihood.

So it's really no surprise at all to me when the crowd decides they've had enough. I feel their restlessness growing more wild as she speaks, and when someone suddenly stands up and screams at her—*makes fun of her*—I worry this won't end well. Juliette keeps cool, keeps talking even as more of them jump to their feet and shout. They're shaking their fists and demanding she be removed from the podium, demanding she be executed for treason, demanding she be imprisoned, at the very least, for speaking against The Reestablishment, but her voice can hardly be heard over the crowd.

And then she starts shouting.

This is bad. This is really, really bad, and my instincts are telling me to panic, that this will only end in bloodshed. I'm trying to look around and still keep my cool, but when Warner catches my eye I know, right away, that he gets it. We're both thinking the same thing:

Abort mission.

Get the hell out of here as soon as possible.

And then—

"This was an ambush. Tell your team to run. Now."

I spin around in an exaggerated motion, so freaked out I nearly lose my balance. I'm hearing Nazeera. I'm hearing *Nazeera*. I'm sure I'm hearing her voice. The problem is, I don't see her anywhere.

Am I dying? I must be dying.

"*Kenji*. Listen to me."

I freeze in place.

I can feel the warmth of her body edging up against mine. I can feel her mouth at my ear, the gentle whisper of her breath against my skin. Jesus. I know how this works. I *invented* this shit.

"You're invisible," I say, so quietly I hardly move my lips.

I feel the tickle of her hair against my neck as she leans closer, and I have to suppress the urge to shiver. It's so strange. So strange to be feeling so many emotions at once. Terror, fear, worry, want. It's confusing. And her hand is on my arm when she says, "I was hoping to explain later. But now you know. And now you have to run."

Shit.

I turn to Ian, who's standing to the left of me, and say, "It's time to bail, bro. Let's go."

Ian looks at me, his eyes widening for a fraction of a second, and then he grabs Lily's hand and shouts, "Run—RUN—"

The sound of a gunshot splits open a moment of silence.

It feels like slow motion. It feels like the world slows down, turns on its side, and swings back around. Somehow I think I can see the bullet as it moves, fast and strong, right at Juliette's head.

It hits its mark with a dull thud.

I'm hardly breathing. I'm beyond pretending I'm not terrified. Shit just got real, super fast, and I have no idea what's about to happen. I know I need to move, need to get the hell out of here before things get worse, but— I don't know why, but I can't convince my legs to work. Can't convince myself to look away.

No one can.

The crowd has gone deathly still in the aftermath. People are staring at Juliette like they didn't believe the rumors. Like they wanted to know if it was really true that this seventeen-year-old girl could murder the most intimidating despot this nation has ever known, and then stand in front of a crowd and peel a bullet off her forehead after an attempted assassination, looking for all the world like the experience was no more annoying than swatting a fly.

I suppose now they know that the rumors were true.

But Juliette looks suddenly more than annoyed. She looks both surprised and furious as she stares at the ruined bullet in the palm of her hand. From this vantage point it looks like a mutilated coin. And then, disgusted, she tosses it to the ground. The sound of the metal hitting stone is delicate. Elegant.

And then—

That's it. Everyone goes apeshit.

People lose their goddamn minds. The crowd is on its feet, roaring threats and obscenities, and they all pull weapons from their bodies and I'm thinking, *Where the hell did they get them from? How did so many of them get through? Who's our mole?*

More gunshots split the air.

I swear, loudly, and move to tackle Castle to the ground—and then I hear it. I *hear* it before I see it. The surprised gasp. The heavy thud. The reverberations of the stage under my feet.

Brendan is on the ground.

Winston is sobbing. Desperately, I push through my teammates, falling to my knees to assess the wound. Brendan's been shot in the shoulder. Relief sags my body. He'll be okay.

I toss the glass pill bottle at Winston and tell him to force a few down

Brendan’s throat, tell him to apply pressure to the wound and remind him that Brendan’s going to be okay, that we just need to get him to Sonya and Sara—and then I remember.

I remember.

I know this girl.

I look up, panicked, and scream, “Juliette, DON’T—”

But she’s already lost control.

Seven

She’s screaming.

She’s just screaming words, I think. They’re just *words*. But she’s screaming, screaming at the top of her lungs, with an agony that seems almost an exaggeration, and it’s causing devastation I never knew possible. It’s like she just —imploded.

It doesn’t seem real.

I mean, I knew Juliette was strong—and I knew we hadn’t discovered the depth of her powers—but I never imagined she’d be capable of this.

Of this:

The ceiling is splitting open. Seismic currents are thundering up the walls, across the floors, chattering my teeth. The ground is rumbling under my feet. People are frozen in place even as they shake, the room vibrating around them. The chandeliers swing too fast and the lights flicker ominously. And then, with one last vibration, three of the massive chandeliers rip free from the ceiling and shatter as they hit the floor.

Crystal flies everywhere. The room loses half its light and suddenly, it’s hard to see exactly what’s happening. I look at Juliette and see her staring, slack-jawed, frozen at the sight of the devastation, and I realize she must’ve stopped screamed a moment ago. She can’t stop this. She already put the energy into the world and now—

It has to go somewhere.

The shudders ripple with renewed fervor across the floorboards, ripping new cracks in walls and seats and *people*.

I don’t actually believe it until I see the blood. It seems fake, for a second, all the limp bodies in seats with their chests butterflied open. It seems staged—like a bad joke, like a bad theater production. But when the blood arrives, heavy and viscous, seeping through clothes and upholstery, dripping down frozen hands, I know we’ll never recover from this.

Juliette just murdered six hundred people at once.

There’s no recovering from this.

Eight

I shove my way through the quiet, stunned, still-breathing bodies of my friends. I hear Winston's soft, insistent whimpers and Brendan's steady, reassuring response that the wound isn't as bad as it looks, that he's going to be okay, that he's been through worse than this and survived it—

And I know my priority right now needs to be Juliette.

When I reach her I pull her into my arms, and her cold, unresponsive body reminds me of the time I found her standing over Anderson, a gun aimed at his chest. She was so terrified—*so surprised*—by what she'd done that she could hardly speak. She looked like she'd disappeared into herself somewhere—like she'd found a small room in her brain and had locked herself inside. It took a minute to coax her back out again.

She hadn't even killed anyone that time.

I try to warm some sense into her again, begging her now to return to herself, to hurry back to her mind, to the present moment.

"I know shit is crazy right now, but I need you to snap out of this, J. Wake up. Get out of your head. We have to get out of here."

She doesn't blink.

"Princess, please," I say, shaking her a little. "We have to go—*now*—"

And when she still doesn't move, I figure I have no choice but to move her myself. I start hauling her backward. Her limp body is heavier than I expect, and she makes a small, wheezing sound that's almost like a sob. Fear sparks in my nerves. I nod at Castle and the others to go, to move on without me, but when I glance around, looking for Warner, I realize I can't find him anywhere.

What happens next knocks the wind from my lungs.

The room tilts. My vision blackens, clears, and then darkens only at the edges in a dizzying moment that lasts hardly a second. I feel off-center. I stumble.

And then, all at once—

Juliette is gone.

Not figuratively. She's literally gone. Disappeared. One second she's in my arms, and the next, I'm grasping at air. I blink fast, convinced I'm losing my mind, but when I look around the room I see the audience members begin to stir. Their shirts are torn and their faces are scratched, but no one appears to be dead. Instead, they begin to stand, confused, and as soon as they start shuffling around, someone shoves me, hard. I look up to see Ian swearing at me, telling me to get moving while we still have a chance, and I try to push back, try to tell him that we lost Juliette—that I haven't seen Warner—and he doesn't hear me, he just forces me forward, offstage, and when I hear the murmur of the crowd grow into a roar, I know I have no choice.

I have to go.

About the Author

Photo by Tana Gandhi

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